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ABSTRACT

The Accelerated Schools program is a popular school restructuring model that targets at-risk students. To serve at-risk students better under the Accelerated Schools program, schools must establish a governance program in which cadres of school practitioners and community members become involved in the decision making. Decisions of these cadres and the school-as-a-whole should be made within the parameters of an inquiry process. The process can take about 6 years and depends greatly on whether the cadres meet regularly, follow a systematic process of problem solving, and use a group process of inquiry. A qualitative study of a parent involvement cadre in an elementary Accelerated School in an urban area was done over a 3-year period. The study explored parent involvement, challenges to parent involvement, utilization of the inquiry process by parents, and the direction of parent involvement. Interviews, observation, and analysis of documents were used in the study. Findings showed that cadre membership remained relatively stable. Parent involvement was hindered by meeting times, limited budgets, and communication problems. The inquiry process was used effectively by the cadres. Also, parents became involved in the classroom as teacher assistants and in adult literacy programs. (Contains 11 references.) (JPT)

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Change and Challenge: A Longitudinal Study of An Accelerated School Parent Involvement Cadre

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Change and Challenge: A Longitudinal Study of
An Accelerated School Parent Involvement Cadre

Accelerated Schools is a widely acclaimed restructuring model that targets at-risk students (Levin, 1990; Rothman, 1991). Levin defines at-risk students as those who are mismatched with an educational system. In order for schools to create a match and at the same time accelerate the learning process so that at-risk students catch up with their more advantaged peers, Levin (1991a) proposes that the school community be involved in two closely related processes. First, the school community needs to establish an Accelerated School governance program in which a number of cadres of school practitioners and parent/community members are involved in a decision making process. Second, decisions of these cadres and the school-as-a-whole are to be made within the parameters of an inquiry process.

It is estimated that learning the processes of the Accelerated School program and making the transition from a conventional to an Accelerated School involves about six years (Hopfenberger, Levin, Meister, & Rogers, 1990). During this time, cadres identified by the school-as-a-whole also undergo change as they work through the challenges of governance and decision making. Typically, a cadre undergoes some change generally in its emphasis or membership. Other times, a cadre will be absorbed into another cadre or even dissolved. One element that influences the longevity and success of a cadre is how well it meets its responsibilities: (1) to meet on a regular basis; (2) to follow a systematic process of problem-solving; and (3) to use a group process of inquiry. These processes of the cadre affect how effectively the cadre interprets the challenges involved in implementing an Accelerated School program.

Levin (1990) believes that parents are largely underutilized resources in the schools. Parents have considerable strength influencing their children's learning processes, helping teachers better understand their children and motivating them to learn. With these strengths, parents are one of the assets within a school community and need to be drawn

into the school-as-a-whole. Typically, a school that adopts the Accelerated School Model identifies a cadre related to parent involvement as one of its initial task groups. Usually, the aims of the parent involvement cadre are to attract a greater number of parents to school, to utilize their talents in the classroom, and to involve parents in the governance structure of the school.

Objectives

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to observe the changes in a parent involvement cadre in an elementary Accelerated School in a large inner-city over a period of three years and to categorize changes and outcomes that occurred in the cadre during each year of the model implementation. During the three-year period, data were gathered from group and individual interviews, participant-observations and researchers' observations, as well as district and school documents and records. The study explored the degree of change in four areas of interest:

1. The membership of the parent involvement cadre each year.
2. The identified challenges of the parent involvement cadre the first two years.
3. The process and degree of the inquiry process utilized by the parent involvement cadre the first two years.
4. The direction of the parent involvement cadre the third year.

Theoretical Framework

Schools are designed to compliment the family in the academic, cognitive, and social growth of the child - not to provide to the child's basic needs. In today's schools, educators are recognizing that as the family has weakened its capacity to educate its children, it is becoming the role of the school to develop ways to involve parents with their own children as well as to involve both parents and children with the school. Moreover, in effectively restructured schools, parents become valuable educational assets. Each issue is further described in the following section.

Levels of Involvement

Epstein (1988) proposes five levels of parent involvement. At the lowest level, parents are involved with the basic needs of the child - providing food, shelter, and clothes. As the child matures, the parents become responsible for preparing the child for school, for supervising and disciplining the child at each grade level, and for fostering positive home conditions that support school learning and behavior appropriate for each grade level. Beyond these basic responsibilities, Epstein suggests that parents may also play a visible role in the school as parent volunteers who assist teachers, administrators, and children in classrooms or other school events. Parents may become involved as supporters of school events like student or sport performances, or as participants in workshops or seminars held at the school. At a higher level of parent involvement, parents may initiate learning activities for their children or children may initiate requests for helping in learning from their parents. At this level of involvement, teachers may provide instructional ideas that are related to the children's classrooms for parents to monitor or assist their children at home. At the pinnacle of parent involvement, parents are involved in decision-making roles in the school - serving on advisory councils, or other committees or groups at the school district, or state level.

Accelerated Schools

Levin (1990, 1991a) developed the Accelerated School Model from research in worker cooperation and educational research. He found that successful organizations are those in which all the employees work toward the same end and share responsibility for quality. Levin further concluded that educators need to look at quality indicators in a student rather than areas of weakness. By focusing on strengths and building on these strengths, this direction forces the educator to develop innovative and enriching approaches to helping students use their skills and talents. In order for change to occur, the entire school needs to be restructured through creative school organizations, stimulating curricula, and powerful instructional techniques. Levin's Accelerated School Model is structured around three guiding principles: unity of purpose, empowerment coupled with responsibility, and building on strengths. Unity of purpose is defined as an agreement

determined by the teachers, parents, and students. These elements become the focal challenges within the school community. School-site empowerment and responsibility refer to the governance structure that teachers and other staff, parents, and students implement to address these needs at the school level and in the home to improve the education of students. Building on strengths refers to "tapping" the talents of all the school participants - teachers, parents, and administrators - and to direct these energies toward one goal - to improve the education of students.

The inquiry process guides the decision making process of the school community (Levin, 1991a). As part of this process, cadres are asked to focus on the problem, brainstorm about the solution, synthesize potential solutions, and develop an action plan. Once a plan has been hypothesized, cadres are asked to pilot-test the plan, evaluate the outcome, and revise the plan as necessary. Levin feels that the inquiry method used at the school site enables the school participants to conduct research to test hypotheses in order to develop programs that truly match the needs of students and the educational system (Accelerated Schools Project Team, 1991). The inquiry process, according to Levin (1991b) takes time. Unless the group takes the time and follows the process systematically, the decisions reached by the group may be short-sighted and ineffective.

Methodology and Data Source

Data were gathered from participant-observations, individual interviews, documents and records, and correspondence (See Ferrara, 1992; Ferrara, Knight, & Sanchez, 1992). Key domains were identified from data analysis and used to develop the case study. Data from the logs, interviews, observations, documents, and records were separated as information units. The units were sorted into categories and then placed into domains (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Spradley, 1979; Spradley, 1980). Domains were initially separated by research questions: characteristics of the parent involvement cadre; targeted challenge areas each year; common challenges for two years; unique challenges each year; method of implementation each year; and direction of parent involvement cadre after year two. .pa

The parent involvement cadre was drawn from 30 teachers and 1 principal in a

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medium size (n@500) elementary school based in a large-inner city school district. The staff remained fairly consistent for the second and third year. At the beginning of the study, 3 males and 27 females at the school site. Thirty-three percent of the teaching staff had less than 3 years teaching experience; 30% had 4-10 years of experience; and 37% had more than 11 years of experience. In an ethnicity breakdown of the school staff involved in the study, 48% of the teachers were Black; 10% were Hispanic; and 41% were Anglo. The teachers attended school about 96% of the time. There were 23 grade level or special education teachers and 7 specialists. At the conclusion of the study, 1 male and 29 female teachers were at the school-site.

Results and Discussion

Membership of Parent Involvement Cadre

Overall, the members of the cadre remained consistent for the first two years. One cadre member, a physical education teacher, moved to another cadre the second year because the cadre's meeting time conflicted with his class schedule. In the third year, the cadre changed significantly. Two cadre members, both Black females, who also belonged to the discipline cadre decided to concentrate on working in the other cadre. Another member of the cadre left the school after six weeks and accepted an administrative appointment in another elementary school in the district. A majority of the remaining cadre members were Hispanic (3 out of 4 members). The interests and direction of the cadre changed each year, reflecting the diversity of the cadre member. In all three years, parents did not attend cadre meetings.

Challenges Faced by Cadre

During the first year, the parent involvement cadre confronted several challenges: meeting times, limited budget, communication with the building principal and other cadres, and meeting addressing the needs of diversity in the school community. During the second year, the parent involvement cadre continued to be challenged by a limited budget. However, they were able to meet on a weekly basis and maintain an effective communication link with the principal and other cadres in the building. The cadre

continued to be challenged with addressing the needs of their diverse school family. In the third year, the cadre met on a more infrequent basis. Although the cadre reported that they met every four to six weeks, only two formal cadre meetings were recorded for the fall semester. To date, only one parent cadre meeting has been documented for the spring semester.

Challenges Faced the First Year. The parent involvement cadre wanted money to buy equipment, like sewing machines and fabric and provide access to these in a proposed parent involvement room at the school. Each cadre also shared another challenge - finding the time to meet. Some teachers were assigned morning duty from 7:30-8:00 AM and worked in the extended day magnet program until 5:00 PM. It was difficult for these teachers to attend early morning or after school meetings. For example, from late February to late April, the staff development cadre attempted to schedule a meeting time between the Accelerated School staff, university team, and school staff. Finally, the groups decided to hold two meetings after school during the first week in May. The after school magnet program was covered by aides and some of the ancillary staff members.

It was also difficult for each cadre to find a common time to meet. Teachers in each cadre were from various grades or elective areas and, typically, did not share a common planning time. Sometimes, part of the cadre met and reported back to the other members. By the end of February, the cadres were meeting formally or informally. Many decisions that each cadre made still needed to be approved by the school-as-a-whole and by the building principal. In early March, the principal approved the formation of a five-member steering committee to discuss decisions that were above the level of the subcommittees and to decide which decisions would be presented to the school-as-a-whole or resolved by the steering committee. The group was appointed by the principal and asked to meet on a weekly basis and determine the process of the Accelerated School vision.

The steering committee also arose out of a need for more communication between groups. Cadres used word of mouth to communicate what had taken place during the meeting. Occasionally, a cadre would appoint a member to take notes and make copies to distribute to other school members. Sometimes, cadre notes were posted on the cadre

bulletin board by the office. However, some of the teachers reported that it was difficult to get permission to make copies of minutes from the meetings.

Another challenge common to each cadre was to discover the role the principal would play in the cadre processes and in the school decision making processes. The parent involvement cadre met with the principal in the fall with proposed parent involvement activities. The principal made suggestions in the calendar and gave approval to the final version of the parent involvement calendar of events.

Challenges Faced the Second Year. Time to meet continued to be a problem for the parent cadre. Many members of the parent cadre were also involved in the extended day-enrichment program. For example, the Hispanic teacher who coordinated the after school literacy program also taught Spanish to students after school. To meet this challenge, the members of the parent cadre scheduled a meeting time one day after school each week between school dismissal and the beginning of the after-school program to meet. Additional meetings were held at lunch or before school as necessary.

More parents became involved in school programs and activities earlier in the year. In addition, attendance at parent-teacher conference days was higher than the previous year. Parents also contributed more than time during the second year. In addition to material preparation, some parents helped monitor classrooms, create school-wide involvement learning games, share books and resources from the home, and even, "pet-sit" the kindergarten pet rabbit. However, parent involvement was limited to specific classrooms rather than to the school as a whole. Typically, parents worked in the lower elementary grades, especially in pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and first-grade classrooms. Tutors from a business partnership were more involved in the upper elementary level classrooms.

The Hispanic literacy program was initiated in the second year. Initially, fourteen adults enrolled in the bimonthly literacy program. However, after one month, the parents asked the teacher if she would consider holding class each week. Approximately twelve of the original group of parents remained in the program by the end of the year. Those who

"dropped out" (two women) found jobs during the day. Their husbands, however, who were unemployed took their wives' places.

The Hispanic teacher who provided instruction to the parents faced several challenges - lack of teaching materials for adult learners, child care services for the children of the Hispanic parents, additional time and the teaching commitment of the Hispanic teacher, and school availability for an evening literacy program. Some of these challenges - materials and child care were resolved after the literacy program began. The other challenges - additional teaching commitment and an evening literacy program for Hispanic and Black parents were unresolved at the end of the second year.

The principal reported that she played less of a decision-making role during the second year. Most of the decisions that the parent cadre made, she felt, were approved by the school-as-a-whole. However, she felt that the evening literacy class was not feasible because the school was in a high crime area. At the end of the school year, the parent cadre formally requested in writing to the principal that the literacy program be provided at night at the campus.

Process and Degree of Inquiry Process

During the first year, the parent cadre was co-directed by an Hispanic and a Black teacher. It appeared from the challenges identified by the cadre after the first year that the cadre used less of the inquiry process to reach a decision. Many of the challenges, like budget concerns and cultural emphasis, were limited to personal concerns rather than school-wide concerns. After the second year, the cadre continued to be dominated by the two leaders. However, findings from interviews, observations, and record data suggested that the cadre actually utilized the inquiry process very effectively. In the third year, one of the stronger leaders became the leader of the discipline cadre and the remaining leader, an Hispanic teacher, continued to represent the Hispanic group.

Inquiry Process the First Year. After the first year, the parent involvement cadre felt that they had a successful year. They brought more parents to school than in previous years and parents became more of a proactive participant in the school during the year. However, some other staff members felt that the parent involvement cadre catered more to the Hispanic community than to the Black community. For example, the parent activities during Black History month in February consisted of a school-wide celebration and a Black History assembly. Black History month began with a school-wide parade around the school courtyard led by a junior high school drum corp. Each class presented a male and female Black leader whom the class selected. At the end of the month, the school scheduled a Black History program that included recitations, songs, dances, and performances by the students. All parents were invited to attend the activities.

Hispanic related activities began and ended the school year - Hispanic Heritage Month in September and a Cinco de Mayo celebration in May. Hispanic Heritage Month was a district wide activity initiated to raise the awareness level of students, teachers, and the community of the Hispanic origin of the area. Parents were invited to visit the school and look at the student and faculty displays in the school hallways. The Cinco de May celebration was also a district event. Each school determined the degree of involvement in the celebration. The parent involvement cadre planned several activities for the celebration in May; consequently, parents and staff were involved in a great deal of preparation. Students from each class had a candy sale contest. The boy and girl from each class who sold the most candy were in the court. The boy and girl in the school who sold the most candy were crowned the king and queen of Cinco de Mayo and led the others in the court around a May pole. The Hispanic faculty cooked traditional food and hosted a teacher luncheon for the day complete with a professional Mariachi band. Parents came to school several times before the celebration to make flowers and costumes for each class. The school used over $500.00 to pay for expenses for the activity. The Black History celebration, on the other hand, involved minimal cost.

Inquiry Process the Second Year. At the beginning of the second year, thirty-two teachers, the building principal, and the university team met in a local hotel conference room. During the sessions, school site staff reflected on the changes that had taken place on an individual and classroom centered basis during the first year as an Accelerated School. At the beginning of the second year, the four cadres from the first year met and evaluated how closely they had helped to move the school toward the vision. Cadres also evaluated other cadres. The staff decided that the parent involvement cadre was highly effective and needed to be continued.

The school cadres also decided to continue to meet once a week; however, during early release days, the teachers could hold discussion meetings about what was to be voted on in each cadre during a school-as-a-whole meeting or in a small group. Teachers form other cadres who wanted to discuss some issue with a cadre could meet with that cadre. Discussion topics would be posted previous to the meeting in an agreed upon area. Minutes of each cadre meeting would also be posted in the same area.

The parent cadre's emphasis during the second year was increased parent involvement in the classrooms, Hispanic parent literacy program, and increased home communication. In end of the year team interviews, teachers reported that parent involvement increased at the classroom level but only in particular classrooms and at specific grade levels. In several instances, several parents served as assistants in one classroom while other classrooms had no parent involvement.

Attendance at literacy classes fell from 12 parents to 6 or 7 parents who came on a consistent weekly basis. The teacher of the program, however, felt parents who attended were enthusiastic and that enrollment would increase if the literacy program was scheduled in the evenings.

The cadre felt successful in its initiative to increase communication outside of school. The cadre started to use more Spanish language communication between the home and school. Hispanic teachers volunteered to translate school-home communications about school programs and students' progress reports into Spanish. Teachers volunteered to cover bilingual teachers' classrooms so that Hispanic teachers could welcome Hispanic

parents to school, give them a tour of the building, and explain their children's educational program. In addition, the cadre took on the responsibility of rewriting school communiques so that the language was clear and jargon-free. Also, information about school events was sent in advance to the Hispanic television and radio stations and local Hispanic newspapers.

Directions for Year Three

One goal of the parent cadre for the third year was for more parents to become involved in all aspects of the school. An analysis of parent involvement by classroom and grade levels indicated that most of the parents who came to school acted as teacher assistants in the lower graders - typically, kindergarten through third grade. Another goal for the third year was for more parents to become involved in the after-school literacy program. The emphasis in the second year was literacy for Hispanic parents. The parent cadre anticipated developing a literacy program for all the school's cultures at meeting times more convenient for parent attendance. A final goal of the parent cadre was to develop a school-wide session to train parents to work in the classroom and in the school-as-a-whole.

According to the staff, the most successful component of the parent cadre in the third year was the parent training and volunteer program. Parents were trained to act as tutors in all the grade levels. In addition, at the first training session in January (1993), parents were trained in using office machines and equipment, bubbling in scantron forms, and providing other clerical support services. The principal reported that parent support was especially helpful at this time because support that the staff had depended on the previous year - tutors from the business sector - was severely reduced in the third year because of extensive budget cuts. Currently, approximately 12 parents volunteer at the school on a consistent monthly basis. One parent reportedly comes to school on a daily basis as a volunteer after she completed the training session.

The literacy program remains in an after school time slot, reduced to a weekly session, and continues to be limited to Hispanic learners. Child care services (e.g.,

babysitting) are provided by the university researcher-facilitator. The teacher continues to conduct the program with copied materials that she used during the second year. Unlike last year, the teacher is not paid for the after school literacy program and reports that she does not have time to teach the program at night. There are 4 parents who have consistently attended the literacy program for the two years. The overall enrollment of the class has dropped to 9 adults or less.

Implications

The school in this study appears to have found in its three year implementation of the Accelerated School Model that parents are key players on a team committed to improving the education of children. The parent involvement cadre also realized over time that as the school discovers additional ways for parents to be involved, more parents become visible partners in the school. During the first year, the cadre felt that successful parent involvement programs were those events that drew the parents to school as visitors like attendance at a parent conference. In the second year, the cadre explored alternative strategies to attract parents to school with effective communication techniques and the Hispanic literacy program. During both years, parents, representatives of the diverse cultures at the school, served on the school-as-a-whole, site-based, decision-making governance structure but not on the more informal governance structure, the parent involvement cadre. In the third year, however, parents took on various participatory roles at the school - staff support, teacher aide, as well as observers (e.g., audience) at school events.

On the surface, the parent involvement cadre appears to be moving forward. This is indicated by an increase in parent attendance at school-related events and increased positive communication between the home and school. Favorable responses on parent surveys suggested that the plan of implementing the parent involvement cadre's plan of implementation for the first three years was successful. Even though the parent involvement cadre sees the bond between the home and the school growing stronger, it recognizes that there are other possibilities that need to be explored in the future.

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Remaining untapped are the passive parents who come to school only when there is a need. Even though the cadre hopes to develop opportunities to spark parents into more proactive roles in the school, there is little follow-up at this time to continue parent training classes. Another quest of the cadre, to explore "transparent" sources of parent involvement in the community - where the parents are involved indirectly in their children's education, may not be possible if the school cannot operate on a more flexible schedule.

Finally, the cadre's effectiveness may be enhanced if the inquiry process as recommending by the Accelerated School Model is adhered to in the future. In the second and third year, the cadre did not meet the objective it set forth. However, the school as a whole made some significant progress - even initiating the parent tutorial program. It is possible that working together as an informed team - the parent involvement cadre, the school-as-a-whole, and parents as cadre members - the school as a family will move forward. The Accelerated School Model can only stay vibrant in a school that adheres to the basic principles of the Accelerated School Model. Therein resides the future direction of this school.

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